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“Lamenting & Loving Our Clouds of Witness”

*the hard season
will
split you through.
Do not worry.
You will bleed water.
Do not worry.
This is grief.
Your face will fall out and down your skin
And
There will be scorching.
But do not worry.
Keep speaking the years from their hiding places.
Keep coughing up smoke from all the deaths you have died.
Keep the rage tender.
Because the soft season will come.
It will come.
Loud.
Ready.
Gulping.
Both hands in your chest.
Up all night.
Up all of the nights.
To drink all damage into love.
--therapy, by Nayyirah Waheed*

As many of you know, I'm in my 3rd year of seminary at Andover Newton. This semester, my primary courses are Forgiveness and Grief. Several times, in the past weeks, I've asked “whose genius idea was THAT?” Oh, right...mine! Oy. Half way through the semester, I should have this halfway figured out, right? That's the thing about ministry, though—do I really know any more than all of you? I don't think so. I think you ask me to notice and reflect. To hold up a mirror of those things we already know *together*.

We know how important it is to honor and bless our beloved dead.

In the Book of Hebrews Chapter 12, verse 1

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...”

Don't worry! That's the last bit of Bible I'll throw at you, today. Remembering together helps us to lay aside the weight. "*Blessed are the stories told with tears and loud, loud, loud laughter*" Remembering together gives us perseverance for this race set before us; this race that is our life. We carry our losses and griefs together.

Grief for which we have photographs or stones. But also, the ambiguous, disenfranchised and unspoken griefs that have no photos. The children never born, babies never conceived. Loved ones still alive but taken from us by Alzheimer's. Loved ones still alive but from whom we have to keep distance for our physical and emotional safety. Losses of jobs and relationships and dreams. Loss of health or physical function to pursue our calling. Loss of the chance for forgiveness...to repair a rupture...to speak the unspoken. Loss of innocence, of feeling safe in this world, of hope for a world without violence and hate. And loss of our selves.

We are all dying, certainly. But we are also being reborn. I read every single cell in our bodies regenerates. Have you heard this? Every seven years, we are a completely new being. Everything about us is different, down to our cells. Isn't that amazing? This helps me make sense of the ways death and loss change us

Years ago, I arrived at the threshold of a hospital room. Inside, two dear souls, two newly crushed hearts—an hour before they had been excitedly welcoming a new baby into the world and now they were bereaved parents.

A tired, loving nurse met me at the door. She grabbed both of my elbows and leaned close to my ear: "*Go in there,*" she said, "*and tell them they are going to be ok. Tell them they are going to make it through this. Their other children need them to focus on the good they still have.*" I didn't have the time or the heart to take off my earrings and set her straight—to tell her no. Instead I smiled and squeezed her back and nodded. Yes, I would walk into that room. But no, I would not lie

Those two beloveds were *not* going to make it. They, as they were, would not survive this tragedy. The people who walked into the hospital hours before: they died with their child. They would live on, yes, but as different people, with different relationships and different ways of making sense of this broken world different down to *the very cells of their bodies*.

Grief changes us and we find ourselves faced with 4 Tasks of Mourning, which are really 4 questions:

1. How do we help one another actualize the loss?
2. How do we help one another process the pain of grief?
3. How do we help one another make external adjustments, internal adjustments and spiritual adjustments?
4. How can we help one another find enduring connection with deceased?

We can answer all of these questions with the same answer...*together*.

Together we share openly about our losses, big and small. We let go of the pressure to “clean up well,” and appear to have it all together. We trust expressing our complicated suffering doesn’t mean we lack perspective faith or hope.

Last year I took a wonderful class called Spiritual Autobiography. We were required to read spiritual memoirs. My choices seemed heart wrenching. A classmate asked, Didn’t I want to read something more uplifting? How could I stomach reading such uncomfortable and painful stories? I struggled to explain...I *needed* to read them. I *needed* to know how the authors of these memoirs lived on from tragedy and violence and unspeakable loss. Have you ever felt this way? All of us here, we all know how to survive...how to keep putting one foot in front of the other... how to keep doing the next right thing...But that’s not always enough, is it?

I want you to know your story matters. Your experience matters. Your life matters. When you share your weakest moments with a community that loves you, you give us a gift. From that gift, we learn and grow and transform. Not only do we receive the gift of loving and accompanying you, we gather data, choices, options about what kinds of things to do when we don’t know what to do. Vulnerability blesses all of us. It helps us to face and actualize our losses, together.

Which brings that second task of processing the pain of grief. Rabbi Stephen Roberts says every grieving person needs to tell his or her story at least 150 times before they can begin to heal! 150 times! He says our friends and family might feel burned out after the first 50 times! That’s real...isn’t it?

We need community and rituals and spaces for lament. We need to come together and lay down our stones. Stones are easier to carry together. One of the dear and wise women in my life told me this: when we write or speak a difficult feeling or memory, it’s weight can begin to live outside of us.

Nayyirah Waheed has another poem called “Heal.”

we all break.
It is ok
To hold your heart outside of your body
For days.
Months.
Years.
At a time.

Grief doesn’t follow a timetable or orderly stages or sequential stages. There are waves and cycles. Old grief takes us by surprise.

“Our face falls out and down our skin”

“We bleed water”

When we make space as a community, for the losses we all experience, we deepen our ability to hold the complexity and fullness of life. Lament is an ancient practice; it's not meant to be done alone. Lament is communal. It's essential to our healing and growth as humans.

In his book, *Raging with Compassion*, John Swinton, says:

A lament is a repeated cry of pain, rage, sorrow, and grief, that emerges in the midst of suffering and alienation... Lament is prayer. It is, however, a very particular form of prayer that is not content with soothing platitudes or images of a God who will listen only to voices that appease and complement. Lament takes the brokenness of human experience into the heart of God and demands that God answer.

We name the messy, ugly, scorching feelings. We let go of knowing. Make room for the unknown. We rest together in mystery...in not having *answers*. We choose instead to *be* the answer for each other. To *be* love and comfort in the midst of confusion and despair. We draw new maps to the final two tasks of mourning: adjusting to a world without the deceased, without everything else we have lost and finding a new, enduring connection and relationship.

*your soul stained my shoulders.
My whole life smells like you.
This
Will take time
Undoing you from my blood.*

--the work, Nayyirah Waheed

This poem called "the work" could go on to say the work will never be done. We will continue to try to make meaning for the rest of our lives. We make meaning together. We connect with our beloved clouds of witness in new and surprising ways. They live on in us and in the love we share with others. One of my witnesses is Bram Venn. He died 5 years ago this month when he was just 2 years old. And every year, his parents Sami and TJ ask the world to do something in Bram's honor: To do something to love fearlessly, like Bram loved fearlessly. May we all take that beautiful charge out into the world. I want to ask us to keep speaking the names of our beloved witnesses and to keep naming the other, quieter losses for one another.

Don't be afraid to remind one another of loss.
It doesn't leave us.
Let us carry our stones together
and let the stories live on in our many clouds of witness
Our shared stories give us life.
May we rest in the wonder and mystery together.
Amen